

## ■ Leadership Competencies

# Team Building

By SFC John K. D'Amato

In the Tunisian desert near El Guettar stand the mountains and sheer cliffs that form the Djebel el Ank Pass.

American soldiers clung to precarious handholds on those wind-swept mountainsides. To keep the German 10th Panzer juggernaut, already poised behind Italian defensive positions, from punching through American lines they had to take and hold the Djebel el Ank Pass.

The job of outflanking the Italian positions on the hills around the pass fell to the men of the 1st Ranger Battalion, Darby's Rangers. They would strike from behind, while the 26th Infantry Regiment assaulted from the front.

The Italians held positions blasted from solid rock. Anti-tank guns, German 88's, heavy machine guns, a heavy minefield and rows of barbed wire faced the soldiers of the 26th. If the Rangers couldn't take the Djebel el Ank by surprise, the 26th would be cut to ribbons.

The Rangers had a chance, however. The Italian right flank was left unguarded. No man, the Italians were convinced, could negotiate the massive mountain slopes of Djebel el Ank, especially at night.

They were right — "no man could." But, the Rangers were a highly trained combat team. Their NCOs had trained them constantly in silent night movement, navigation in the darkness, and night fighting. Each sergeant was convinced that teamwork overcomes the greatest of obstacles.

Ranger foot patrols had found an almost impossible ten-mile route over a series of gorges, crevices, fissures and saddles that led to a plateau overlooking the Italian position.

Where one man might have failed, Rangers working as a team could succeed. NCOs with blackened faces and in full field packs lifted, pulled and pushed their men through a dead-black night across terrain most wouldn't attempt even

in daylight. When faced with sheer cliffs they formed human chains. Nothing would stop them.

Using color coded flashlights, the Rangers spread from their single-file formation into attack positions and awaited the dawn. NCOs scurried among their men, ensuring everyone knew what it was he had to do.

At 0600, March 21, 1942, the 1st Ranger Battalion swept down on the startled Italians. NCOs directed fire by teams with devastating effect. Under covering fire, a sergeant and his team would move forward and provide covering fire for the next team.

Soon, the Rangers were on top of the Italians. The soldiers quickly proved that the bayonet training their sergeants had given them had not been in vain. Under the cry of "Give 'em cold steel!" the Rangers hacked and slashed their way through a line of Italian foxholes.

In twenty minutes, the Rangers had broken enemy resistance at Djebel El Ank Pass. Official records credit the Rangers and the 26th Infantry with the capture of more than a thousand prisoners that morning. The Rangers had one man wounded.

Without the coordinated actions of squad leaders and their teams, and without the hundreds of hours each man had received in night fighting and bayonet drill, American losses certainly would have been higher.

Though there were many individual acts of heroism, success at Djebel el Ank was not due to each man acting alone. Victory came through teamwork — each soldier doing what he had been trained by his NCO to do, and all working together toward a common goal.

In 1989, an NCO Leader Development Task Force developed a list of nine leadership competencies, comprised of skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for every NCO to master at each skill level. Perhaps no competency is more critical to the success of the American Army on the battlefield than "Soldier-Team De-

velopment" at the Sergeant E-5 level.

According to FM 22-102, Soldier Team Development, success on tomorrow's AirLand battlefield "will depend largely on the development of cohesive combat-ready teams consisting of well-trained and highly motivated soldiers."

But, if team building is the most important competency for a sergeant who is a team leader, it is also one of the most difficult.

Unlike any of the eight remaining individual competencies, team building requires an NCO to be proficient in each of the other eight competencies if he or she is to have any hope of success.

Technical and Tactical Proficiency, Professional Ethics, Planning, Use of Available Systems, Decision Making, Communication, Teaching and Counseling, and Supervision (the remaining eight competencies) all play an important part in building a solid, effective and cohesive team.

Developing team cohesion is one of the primary skills listed under Soldier-Team Development, and the NCO will soon discover that it too involves mastery of a whole set of other skills. But, without the bonding formed through confidence, respect and trust between team members and between the members and their leader, there is no cohesion.

Building those bonds may seem like an overwhelming task at first, especially to a young sergeant taking over a new squad or team, but help is available. Since the young sergeant's team is part of the platoon, company, battalion and higher teams, it is in everyone's best interest that each part operate at peak efficiency.

Every NCO and commander leading higher level teams will be eager to help, since they realize that strengthening the sergeant's team means improving their own larger teams.

The source for information on team building and developing team cohesion is FM 22-102, Soldier Team Develop-





Photo by MSG (M) H. H. H.

In combat, information is strength. When the sergeant says, "Here's the situation," every team member should know that the information is accurate and that the leader can be trusted not to embellish the facts or withhold details.

ment. The manual provides a simple, common sense, step-by-step approach to a complex process.

Here the sergeant learns that the status of any given team is constantly changing — effected by personnel moves, time together, individual and group training, and events happening inside and outside the unit.

A team is always in one of three stages of development: Formation, development or sustainment. But the performance level of any team is susceptible to change and the team can be in the sustainment stage one week and back to the development stage the next. Because the soldiers who make up the team have different needs and motivations depending on which stage of development the team is in, a good NCO is constantly assessing the team's performance levels.

What molds a group of individuals together is acceptance, open communication, reliance on one another and accep-

tance of shared standards and values. At the center of the team is the sergeant, who must create a bond with the team, set and enforce standards and set the example in the development of closer relationships.

That team bonding begins for new soldiers the moment they arrive. If a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, then a team is only as good as its most unskilled member. Chances are, since a new soldier has not trained with the team that soldier is the one who needs to learn the team values, standards and procedures in order to maintain the team's present performance level.

Even before new members are introduced to the team, the sergeant must start building trust and confidence. Soldiers must feel their concerns will be heard and their problems are important to their leaders.

According to FM 22-102, the sergeant does this by ensuring that, "soldiers' pay records are accurately processed; person-

nel, medical, and other records are in their proper place; soldiers have all their personal equipment; an adequate place to sleep; they know where key places such as the dining facility, hospital, chapel and recreational facilities are located; and that they are shown the kind of caring essential for developing loyalty to the team."

Selecting a conscientious sponsor, or buddy, who acts as a role model of what team members are expected to be, know and do is a critical step in the initial phase. In combat situations, rapid adaption to the team, cohesion and cooperation are even more critical, and the "buddy" selected should be an experienced combat soldier.

In both cases, the selection of the "buddy" sends a clear message to the new soldier that the sergeant cares, and gives the soldier an example to follow.

Once soldiers have finished in-processing and are introduced to the team, their natural instinct is to want to belong,



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Photo by SSG Phil Prater

Battlefield success depends on development of cohesive, combat-ready teams consisting of well-trained and highly motivated soldiers.

especially if the team is noted for its high standards of performance.

These new team members will watch the more established team members and their leaders to determine what they must do to gain acceptance. They want to know what the standards are and what actions are rewarded and what are punished. They want to know what the team's goals are — and where they fit into the overall scheme. It's up to the team leader to provide those answers.

If the team member has not already had an orientation briefing with the sergeant then there are several key areas that must be addressed, critical to building a cohesive team. The sergeant should discuss with the soldier,

- Unit/team values and standards.
- Unit/team mission and goals.
- Unit/team standing operating procedures.
- Unit heritage.

The values most important to the team are encompassed in the Professional Army Ethic, and the sergeant must set the example for the new soldier in word and in deed. Loyalty to the nation, the Army and the unit are critical to the es-

tablishment of a cohesive team.

The sergeant shows loyalty to the soldier through caring and genuine concern. In turn, a soldier follows orders and supports the chain of command.

The sergeant should also set an example of selfless service, ensuring the needs of team members are met before his or her own. The history of the United States Army is full of accounts of NCOs who have exemplified the ideal of selfless service, sometimes sacrificing their own lives to ensure the survival of their comrades. In combat or in training, all members of a team trust that those with whom they serve will "be there for them," committed to mission accomplishment rather than self-interest.

Nowhere is this issue of dependability more important than in the sergeant's daily example and insistence on personal integrity. Soldiers must know that what their sergeant says is what their sergeant does. Integrity is the basis for the trust that grows between sergeants and their team members.

It is this honesty in all matters that many call candor, or faithfulness to the truth, that helps bind a team together. In com-

bat, when the sergeant says, "this is the situation..." no team member should think they've heard a lie or only half the truth.

Sometimes telling the truth or facing a situation head-on takes a good deal of courage. But soldiers expect both physical and moral courage from their leaders, just as it is expected of them. Tough, realistic and often physical training builds physical courage. Strict adherence to ethical principles and doing what is right, rather than what is easy, builds moral courage.

Soldiers also expect their leaders to be competent. To a large degree, the sergeant's demonstrated technical and tactical proficiency is the basis for the team's confidence in him or her. The sergeant's job, in turn, is to train the team to a highest level of competency.

According to FM 22-102, "training is the heart of soldier team development, and all unit tasks and missions are training opportunities." Training also is one of the best ways a sergeant can show he or she cares about soldiers. Providing tough, challenging training sends a clear message that the sergeant is concerned about the soldier's safety and survival in combat.

Once all the soldiers on a team accept the previous values as their own — when they work late to accomplish the team's and unit's mission, or push themselves past personal convenience to build and hone their level of competency — then they are demonstrating the level of commitment a sergeant must demand and expect.

Cohesive teams are built through two-way, honest communication, a sense of caring, trust and confidence between all team members and the sergeant/team leader.

Team building is not an easy task. It is complicated, tedious, sometimes frustrating, and often must start all over again when a new soldier enters the team.

It is, however, what sergeants do.

Few things in a military career are more rewarding than building a strong combat-ready team of individuals who think and act as one.

And, compared to team building, nothing we do as sergeants is more important for our success on the modern battlefield.

For those who doubt...

"In the Tunisian desert near El Guettar, stand the mountains and sheer cliffs that form the Djebel el Ank Pass..." ■

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